

BLACKFOOT COMMUNITY PROJECT

PURPOSE OF THE BRIEFING DOCUMENT:

The Blackfoot Challenge, in partnership with The Nature Conservancy, is developing the Blackfoot Community Project as a community-based effort to guide the future ownership and management of key lands in the Blackfoot Valley. Currently owned by Plum Creek Timber Company, these lands are being purchased and re-sold by the Conservancy according to this community-driven plan. Some lands will go into public ownership and others to private ownership with safeguards to protect community and conservation values.

Given the strong community interest, The Nature Conservancy and Plum Creek reached an agreement in September 2003 on the sale of up to nearly 89,000 acres in the upper Blackfoot Valley over the next five years. Phase I involves about 41,000 acres for approximately \$30 million. Federal funds will be used for BLM and Forest Service acquisitions and the purchase of conservation easements by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The BLM has received \$9 million, the Forest Service \$18 million and USFWS \$2 million in FY 2004, FY 2005, FY 2006 and FY 2007 in LWCF funds to help fund Phase I of the project. The BLM and FS have made out-year LWCF requests. The balance will be covered by philanthropic donations and funds generated from sales to private landowners.

ISSUES:

The Blackfoot Challenge, comprised of local landowners, federal and state land managers, local government officials and corporate landowners, has been working in the Blackfoot Valley for 10 years to coordinate conservation efforts in the watershed. The Challenge is developing a disposition and management plan to guide the ownership and management of these lands over the long term, specifically addressing community values for recreational access, grazing, wildlife habitat, forestry, and economic stability.

An important consideration in the Blackfoot's diversity and rural character is that large landholdings in the watershed remain intact. Sixty percent is now in public ownership and the remaining 40 percent is made up of primarily large working ranches or large timberland holdings. Fragmentation of private lands by subdivision and development is a threat to wildlife habitat and the traditional agricultural and rural lifestyle of the watershed. Maintaining the rural lifestyle and protecting the natural resources of the Blackfoot are top priorities for the Blackfoot Challenge.

Community meetings were held in each participating community in the valley. All private landowners adjacent to the project lands were contacted, as some have expressed an interest in acquiring additional acreage. Ranchers with grazing leases on Plum Creek lands were also contacted, and they have indicated a critical need to continue to graze these lands. There was a strongly voiced desire to see these leases remain as grazing areas and to go to public ownership, if necessary, in order to continue traditional grazing usage. The desire to maintain intact working ranches is clear.

MAIN DECISION OR MESSAGE:

At public meetings, Blackfoot Valley citizens and landowners expressed strong support for substantial public ownership of these lands to maintain historic public access, traditional grazing leases, and high natural resource values. They also encouraged ownership consolidation by adjacent public landowners to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of management activities such as grazing administration, forest management, noxious weed control, and public recreation management.

BUREAU PERSPECTIVE:

The BLM is only one of several public agencies expected to acquire some of Plum Creek's acreage. Other agencies include the U.S. Forest Service, the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. All agencies are active partners in the Blackfoot Challenge and are committed to collaboration and community involvement.

CONTACT:

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